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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 001156

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: ALL-PARTY TALKS ON ETHNIC ISSUE RESUME
WITHOUT OPPOSITION'S INVOLVEMENT

REF: A. COLOMBO 1048

[1](#)B. COLOMBO 1127

Classified By: CDA JAMES F. ENTWISTLE FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: On July 11, President Rajapaksa addressed both an All-Party Conference (APC), called to develop a solution to the ethnic conflict, and an Experts' Panel, drawn to provide constitutional and legal advice to the APC. The main opposition United National Party (UNP) did not attend the APC, raising questions as to the Conference's potential to yield results reflecting a true consensus. Interlocutors from both the UNP and the President's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) told us they would like to see their parties collaborate on an ultimate solution that would devolve power, while representatives of the monk-based Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) and the Marxist, Sinhalese nationalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) continued to act as spoilers. Despite well-intentioned members in the two major parties, the opposition's refusal to take part in the APC and parties like the JHU and JVP agitating against any possible solution make it unlikely a genuine southern consensus on the ethnic issue will emerge anytime soon. That said, the President's initiative is the main effort in the peace process at present and should be supported and encouraged. End summary.

ALL PARTIES NOT AT CONFERENCE

[1](#)2. (U) On July 11 the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) held the sixth session of an All-Party Conference (APC) assembled by the president to address the ethnic conflict, and the first session of an Experts' Panel, drawn together to offer the APC technical support on legal and constitutional questions. President Rajapaksa addressed both groups, encouraging participants to agree on a framework that may serve as the basis for future negotiations with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Rajapaksa urged a "creative and imaginative" "home grown" proposal that draws ideas from each of the political parties. In

addition to his own Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the monk-based Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), the Marxist, Sinhalese nationalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), and the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP), an anti-Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) group, were also present, along with some smaller parties.

13. (C) Notably absent was the main opposition United National Party (UNP), whose leader Ranil Wickremesinghe, had insisted the GSL recommit to the Tokyo Declaration pledge to achieve maximum devolution within a united Sri Lanka before his party would return to the APC (Ref A). Another impediment to the UNP's participation was the July 6 defection of a UNP Member of Parliament (MP) Susantha Punchinilame, who accepted a position with the SLFP. According to UNP MP Lakshman Senaviratne in a July 13 meeting with poloff, the UNP believes in the APC, but wonders whether the President is genuine in his desire to build consensus. He said there is a possibility for the UNP to work with the SLFP, perhaps through talks or workshops between the two parties. However, he sought a gesture of good faith from the President, complaining that the President's SLFP had "lured away" UNP MPs to join its ranks.

14. (C) Senaviratne suggested that President Rajapaksa could meet with Wickremesinghe, a suggestion SLFP MP Dinesh Gunawardena also made in a July 13 meeting with poloff. (As reported reftel B, Rajapaksa and Wickremesinghe met late last week at the behest of

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Indian Foreign Secretary Saran but that was undercut by the defection of the UNP MP while the two leaders were meeting.) In a July 12 meeting with poloff, SLFP MP Dilan Perera noted that the UNP had fallen into a typical role for an opposition party, criticizing the government without offering alternatives. Perera suggested that Wickremesinghe had the potential to break that mold for the sake of national interests. Perera joked that if the two parties did not find an official method of cooperation, "half the UNP would cross over to the SLFP," creating a de facto consensus. All interlocutors were somewhat optimistic that dialogue between the UNP and SLFP was possible. Gunawardena summed up, "I can't devalue the APC, but most discussions will take place outside of it."

"SPOILER PARTIES"

15. (C) Discussing a possible consensus, the UNP's Senaviratne said, "We have to isolate the JVP," a sentiment the SLFP's Perera echoed. However, Perera also noted that although "The JVP will never find a reason to say yes" to the government's proposals, President Rajapaksa has "managed to get some of the spoilers on board." Perera pointed to the JVP and JHU's willingness to "look at the Indian model" as an indication Rajapaksa has mitigated some of those parties' hard-line views. The SLFP's Gunewardena said that the JVP and JHU do not oppose devolution as such, but simply worry about steps that may pave the way for an ultimate national division.

16. (C) The JHU, for its part, continues to engage in unhelpful rhetoric. In a June 12 meeting with poloff, JHU representatives said they had initially welcomed the news of the APC, but balked when the president included discussion of a final solution to devolve power, allegedly because of "pressure from the (donor) Co-Chairs and interested groups." The JHU interlocutors said the government should not engage

with the LTTE until the Tigers disavow arms, and expressed worry about the Co-Chairs' "demand" for a federal solution.

17. (C) The JVP, too, hindered cooperation, holding a series of public meetings entitled "Defending the Motherland," using divisive rhetoric to draw crowds. According to Senaviratne, "The only thing the JVP and the JHU try to draw consensus on is a return to war!" Lawyer H.L. DeSilva, a member of the Experts' Panel, told poloff in a June 29 meeting that the Southern parties will not be able to achieve consensus as long as the JVP and the JHU are involved. DeSilva also criticized the UNP, saying the party changed its position as expedient and its failure to put forward a candidate to attend the July 11 APC meeting "demonstrates a lack of commitment."

COMMENT

18. (C) Comment: Interestingly enough, interlocutors from both the SLFP and UNP felt there was room for the two major parties to collaborate on a long-term solution and to marginalize fringe parties that might undermine the national interest, once again confirming our view that the UNP and the SLFP have much in common on the major issues. Once again, however, members of both parties seemed more focused on short-term political gains than on building the consensus required for an ultimate resolution of the ethnic issue. Nonetheless, the President's all-party effort is the main "peace" effort at the moment and thus should be encouraged and supported. End comment.

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